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Special Operations Forces in Operation Enduring Freedom: Background and Issues for Congress

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Summary

Special Operations Forces (SOF) are elite, specialized military units that can be inserted “behind the lines” through land, sea, or air to conduct a variety of operations, many of them clandestine. SOF units are expected to play an important role in U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and possibly elsewhere as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, the U.S. military campaign against terrorists. This short report provides background information and issues for Congress on U.S. SOF units and will be updated as events warrant.

Overview

Special Operations Forces and predecessor forces have played a role in most U.S. conflicts. Congress in 1986 expressed particular concern for the status of SOF within overall U.S. defense planning and consequently legislated measures to strengthen their position, having noted in 1985 that SOF provide the United States an “immediate and primary capability to respond to terrorism.”¹

SOF personnel are carefully selected and undergo highly demanding training. SOF activities, which generally require greater proficiency and specialization than is normally found in conventional military units, include the following:

- **Direct Action.** Short-duration, small-scale offensive actions such as raids, ambushes, hostage rescues, and “surgical strikes.”
- **Strategic (Special) Reconnaissance.** Clandestine operations in hostile territory to gain significant information.
- **Unconventional Warfare.** Advising and supporting indigenous insurgent and resistance groups operating in the territory of a common enemy. (For example, the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.)

¹ Current authorities and definitions for SOF are found in Title 10, United States Code, Section 167. The statement of SOF importance to counter-terrorism was made in P.L. 99-145; 99 Stat. 760.

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- **Foreign Internal Defense.** Assisting host nation military capabilities to forestall or defeat insurgent activities.
- **Civil Affairs.** Promoting civil-military cooperation between U.S. military forces and the foreign governments and populations within their area of operations.
- **Psychological Operations.** Influencing the attitudes and behavior of relevant populations to assist in accomplishing security missions.
- **Counterterrorism (CT).** Operations conducted by Special Mission Units to resolve or preempt terrorist incidents abroad and activities to assist or work with other CT-designated agencies within the United States.
- **Humanitarian Assistance.** Providing various rudimentary services to foreign populations in adverse circumstances.
- **Theater Search and Rescue.** Finding and recovering pilots and air crews downed on land or sea outside the United States, sometimes in combat or clandestine situations.
- Such other activities as may be specified by the President or Secretary of Defense.

Many observers expect that SOF operations will constitute a significant part of CENTCOM activities on the ground in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. SOF units reportedly have been assisting indigenous anti-Taliban forces and conducting clandestine reconnaissance missions. Additional potential roles include locating and Taliban or terrorist forces, designating them for attack by U.S. aircraft, capturing them in so-called “snatch-and-grab” operations, and killing them. Some SOF being used in Afghanistan reportedly have been contributed by allies, such as highly regarded Special Air Service units from the United Kingdom.

Command Structures and Funding

In 1986, Congress established the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) as a new unified command to oversee training, doctrine, and equipping of all U.S. SOF. The Commander in Chief of USSOCOM, or CINCSOC, is a four-star General or Admiral who may be from any Service. USSOCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, FL. CINCSOC reports directly to the Secretary of Defense, although an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) provides immediate civilian oversight over many of USSOCOM activities. Although CINCSOC may command SOF operations anywhere in the world -- when specifically directed by the Secretary of Defense -- it is more normal for CINCSOC to organize and provide SOF to fight under the command of a regional CINC.

U.S. military operations in and around Afghanistan are conducted by the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) which also conducted Operation Desert Storm in 1991. CINCCENT, whose primary headquarters coincidentally is also at MacDill AFB, has a permanent SOF subordinate command. This command, known as SOCCENT, would plan for, coordinate use of, and command all SOF forces provided to CINCCENT by CINCSOC. Most SOF units have trained with SOF units from other services.

U.S. SOF units include a total of roughly 45,000 active and reserve personnel across all the services, or about 2% of all U.S. active and reserve forces. The current, dedicated

USSOCOM budget is about \$3.7 billion per year, or a bit more than 1% of the annual defense budget.

Army Special Operations Forces²

U.S. Army SOF (ARSOF) include 26,000 soldiers from the Active Army, National Guard, and Army Reserve who are organized into Special Forces units, Rangers units, special operations aviation units, civil affairs units, psychological operations units, and special operations support units. ARSOF Headquarters and other resources, such as the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, are located at Fort Bragg, NC.

Five active Special Forces Groups (Airborne) are stationed at Fort Bragg and at Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Campbell, KY, and Fort Carson, CO. Special Forces soldiers – also known as the Green Berets – are trained in various skills, including foreign languages, that allow teams to operate independently in designated regions of the world. Two Army National Guard SF groups are headquartered in Utah and Alabama. An elite light infantry, airborne combat force, the 75th Ranger Regiment, is stationed at Fort Benning, GA.

Army special operations aviation units feature pilots trained to fly the most sophisticated Army rotary-wing aircraft in the toughest environments, day or night. The 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Campbell, KY. The regiment's aircraft include MH47-E, MH60-L, and MH-6M helicopters.

The most frequently deployed SOF assets are civil affairs (CA) units, which provide experts in every area of civil government to help insure that the administration of civilian affairs in the theater poses a minimum hindrance to U.S. military objectives. The 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (Airborne) is the only active CA unit; all other CA units reside in four Army Reserve Civil Affairs Commands located in Pensacola, FL, Mountain View, CA, Riverdale, MD, and Bronx, NY.

Psychological operations units provide communications to large foreign audiences through mass media, including radio, TV, Internet, print media, and face-to-face communication. Soldiers must have technical and language skills paired with knowledge of regional cultures. The 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) is stationed at Fort Bragg, and two Army Reserve groups are located in Cleveland, OH, and at Moffett Federal Airfield, CA.

Finally, Fort Bragg is also home to specialized supporting units and Special Mission Units that support a variety of ARSOF and joint missions. Notable among these is the 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, often called Delta Force, which is reportedly based at Fort Bragg and is trained specifically for counterterrorism missions, including hostage-rescue and snatch-and-grab operations. Although widely discussed in the press, the Pentagon does not publicly acknowledge Delta Force's existence or talk about its operations or capabilities.

² Information about current Army SOF was taken from an article by Lieutenant General Bryan (Doug) Brown, "U.S. Army Special Operations: Focusing on People – Humans are More Important than Hardware," *Army*, October 2001, pp. 157-162.

Air Force Special Operations Forces³

The Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) includes about 10,000 active and reserve personnel, of which about 22% are stationed overseas. AFSOC is headquartered at Hurlburt Field, FL, which is also the home of most of AFSOC's active units, including the 16th Special Operations Wing, the 720th Special Tactics Group, the 18th Flight Test Squadron, and the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School. The 352nd Special Operations Group is located at RAF Mildenhall, England, and the 353rd Special Operations Group, is located at Kadena Air Base, Japan.

Reserve AFSOC components include the 193rd Special Operations Wing, Air National Guard stationed at Harrisburg, PA, the 280th Combat Communications Squadron, Air National Guard stationed at Dothan, AL., and the 919th Special Operations Wing, Air Force Reserve stationed at Duke Field, FL.

AFSOC units are trained for direct action, unconventional warfare, special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, and counter terrorism operations. AFSOC's Core Tasks are grouped into four mission areas: Forward Presence and Engagement, Information Operations, Precision Employment/Strike, and Special Operations Forces Mobility. AFSOC personnel deploy with specially trained and equipped forces from each service. The U.S. Special Operations School provides special operations-related education to personnel from all branches of DoD, other government agencies, and allied nations.

AFSOC's three active-duty flying units are composed of more than 100 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, many of them specialized variants of the basic C-130 cargo airplane, that are organized in composite wings and groups. These aircraft include:

- MC-130E Combat Talon I and MC-130H Combat Talon II aircraft, which infiltrate, resupply, and exfiltrate U.S. and allied SOF units during day and night and in adverse weather.
- MC-130P Combat Shadow aircraft, which fly clandestine (low-visibility), low-level, single- or multi-aircraft missions, primarily at night, penetrating politically sensitive or hostile territory to refuel other aircraft. MC-130Ps can also deliver SOF and equipment by airdrop.
- AC-130H Spectre Gunship and the AC-130U Spooky Gunship aircraft, which conduct close air support, air interdiction and force protection operations. Close air support missions include supporting troops in contact, escorting convoys, and urban operations. Air interdiction missions are conducted against preplanned targets or targets of opportunity. Force protection missions include air base defense and facilities defense.
- EC-130 Commando Solo aircraft, which conduct psychological operations and civil affairs broadcasts in AM, FM, and high frequency radio, TV, and military communications bands. Missions are flown at maximum altitude to ensure optimum broadcast range. Secondary

³ For additional information on Air Force SOF units, see Wall, Robert. Conflict Could Test Special Ops Improvements. *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, October 1, 2001: 30.

missions include information warfare, electronic attack, and some intelligence gathering.

- MH-53J/M Pave Low helicopters, which conduct low-level, long-range, undetected penetration into denied areas, at day or night, and in adverse weather, for infiltration, exfiltration, and resupply of SOF.

The V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, a Marine Corps priority, is also being developed for AFSOC. If procured, SOF CV-22s will conduct long-range vertical takeoff and landing infiltration, exfiltration and resupply missions. The Osprey may provide increased speed and range, low-altitude adverse-weather penetration, a state-of-the-art electronic warfare suite, and maneuverability to perform missions that would normally require fixed wing and rotor wing aircraft.

Naval Special Operations Forces⁴

The naval special warfare command includes about 4,950 active and almost 1,200 reserve personnel, and is headquartered at Coronado, CA. Navy special warfare forces are organized into SEAL teams (SEAL stands for Sea, Air and Land), Special Boat Units (SBUs), and SEAL Delivery Vehicle (SDV) teams based on both coasts. The 4,950 active personnel include about 2,500 SEAL commandos and SEAL-qualified medical corpsmen, about 500 combatant craft crewmen, about 1,500 fleet support technicians, and about 200 SDV personnel.

SEAL teams are maritime multipurpose combat forces trained and equipped to perform various SOF missions. SEAL commandos are considered the best-trained combat swimmers in the world, and can be deployed covertly from submarines or from sea-based aircraft. They typically operate in 16-man platoons and conduct clandestine ground and waterborne special reconnaissance and direct action missions in a maritime, littoral, or riverine environment. A SEAL platoon and SBU detachment routinely embark with each deploying Navy/Marine Corps amphibious ready group. A SEAL platoon embarks with each carrier battle group deploying from the East Coast and a SEAL platoon is dedicated to – but does not embark with – each carrier group deploying from the West Coast.

Some observers believe SEALs are unlikely to be used significantly in Afghanistan, given the country's landlocked location, hundreds of miles from shore. Others note that SEALs can be inserted into Afghanistan by ship-launched helicopters, just like other SOF.

The Marine Corps has no dedicated SOF units, but Marine Expeditionary Units (MEUs), which contain roughly 2,000 Marines, including an infantry battalion and a small air detachment, can receive training in specific special operations prior to deploying overseas, in which case they are certified as special-operations-capable (SOC) for the duration of their deployment and are referred to as MEU(SOC)s.

⁴ Sources for information in this section: Waterborne Commandos. *Armed Forces Journal International*, January 2000: 31-33 (an interview with Rear Admiral Eric T. Olson, Commander, U.S. Naval Special Warfare Command); Gourley, Scott R. Setting The Seal On Maritime Special Operations Forces. *Jane's Navy International*, June 1999: 18-21, 23. See also, Worthington, George. Whither Naval Special Warfare? *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, January 1996: 61-63; Nolan, Mary I. Warriors Who Come From the Sea. *Sea Power*, February 1995: 38-40; Waller, Douglas C. Hell Week. *Newsweek*, January 10, 1994: 28-33.

Navy ships and Navy and Marine Corps aircraft can also be used to insert or recover special operations forces of other military services. The aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk* was recently deployed from its home port in Japan with only a partial complement of fixed-wing aircraft, and observers speculate that the ship will go to the Northern Arabian Sea to serve as a launch and recovery platform for helicopter-borne special forces units.

Issues for Congress

Potential issues for Congress regarding SOF include the following:

Intelligence Support. Clandestine direct-action operations, particularly those aimed at capturing or killing specific individuals or groups, depend for their success to a large degree on having timely, high-quality intelligence about the targets in question. Are U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities against targets in Afghanistan – and communications links to SOF forces – sufficient to provide SOF units with high-quality intelligence on a timely (i.e., real-time or near-real-time) basis?

Work with Resistance Forces. What kind of assistance are SOF units providing to the Northern Alliance and other indigenous resistance forces, and how does this assistance fit into the broader U.S. anti-terrorism effort? Are U.S. special forces taking sufficient advantage of the general knowledge and specific intelligence that resistance forces and local populations can provide? What are the operational risks of having U.S. special forces work with resistance forces and local populations?

Funding, Equipment, and Organization. Have U.S. special forces been funded adequately in recent years? Should the budget for special forces be increased, and if so, how should the additional funds be spent? Is the size and organization of U.S. special forces appropriate in light of the new campaign against terrorism and other 21st-Century security challenges, or should it be changed? How will future SOF capabilities be affected by potential changes to the V-22 Osprey program?

Personnel Retention. Some special forces units, such as the SEALs, have experienced difficulties in recent years in meeting personnel retention goals. What is the current SOF personnel-retention situation, and what, if anything, should be done to improve it?

Joint and Combined Operations. How much do the special forces of the various services train with one another for joint (i.e., multiservice) operations? How has joint SOF training been affected by the creation of USSOCOM? How much do U.S. SOF forces train with British and other foreign SOF forces for combined (i.e., multi-national) operations? Do foreign SOF units have any capabilities that U.S. SOF units lack, and if so, should USSOCOM seek to incorporate these capabilities into U.S. SOF units?